

Thoughts & Perceptions

Egyptian Public Intellectuals and their “Wests”

ROBERT WOLTERING

Western (European and North-American) constructions of the West tend to identify human rights, democracy, and freedom as key Western values. Were we to take these premises to be the characteristics of the West, we would find that the West is highly appreciated throughout the Arab and wider Muslim world: recent opinion polls have shown that the majority of respondents from Morocco to Indonesia also value human rights, prefer democracy to dictatorship, and favour freedom over repression.¹

It is clear that there is something spurious in the above postulation. The mistake lies not so much in the opinion polls, as much as it lies in the premise: while Western publics may generally identify the West with human rights and other lofty ideals, “non-Western” publics may hold different opinions. To further investigate this difference of opinion we could again turn to opinion polls, yet for a more thorough understanding of the ideological meaning of the West in the country of my particular interest—Egypt—I will zoom in on the public debate as shaped by popular intellectuals of various ideological trends.

The intellectual landscape in the Arab world today resists a straightforward categorization. The long established lack of political and press freedoms smothers the display of intellectual debates which otherwise could be monitored freely. A conventional division employed both within and outside the Arab world is between “Islamist” and “secular” discourses. Others have opted for a more comprehensive categorization comprising Islamic, Marxist/leftwing, nationalist, and liberal intellectual trends.² In this contribution I discuss three recent publications of authors belonging to various trends. Galal Amin, Muhammad Imara,

Gradually, the term “occidentalism” is gaining ground. Since the end of the Cold War and the consequent loss of a West that could be defined in terms of (and against) its Communist nemesis in the East, the process of imaging the West is steadily acquiring students. This article reviews how popular writers in Egypt imagine the West, showing that while their views on the West are shaped differently by particular ideologies, they converge in condemning the policies emerging from the West.

and Rida Hilal are all prolific authors of carefully published books, and have been regular contributors to the country’s major newspapers for at least a decade. While the economist Galal Amin and the jurist Muhammad Imara continue to be quite productive, the journalist Rida Hilal has not been heard of since he mysteriously disappeared in August 2003. The three publications fall loosely within certain broad trends: “left-wing nationalist,” “Islamic,”

and “liberal” respectively. The following exposé highlights a number of common strategies in Arab appreciations and representations of Europe and the West. I argue that the way in which the West is portrayed is to a large extent determined by ideology, and that none of the three ideological trends hold the West to be unequivocally identifiable with the aforementioned lofty ideals.

Galal Amin: unabated Western imperialism

In 2002 the first Arab Human Development Report was published. This UNDP-sponsored report, drafted by a team of prominent Arab scholars and intellectuals, described with great candour the major problems in the contemporary Arab world. While the report was praised by many, some vehemently opposed the report for serving Western interests. Rather than elaborating on what was wrong with the Arab world, the authors had better focused on the oppressive role of external actors. One of the more prominent Arab intellectuals to attack the Report was the Egyptian economist Galal Amin of the American University in Cairo. To Amin, the Report almost constituted treason, since it played perfectly in the hands of the West. Amin was not alone in this assessment.

Various nationalist and leftist newspapers and intellectuals criticized the report for the same reason. In one of Amin’s recent publications we can see how strongly he feels about the importance of the West, and how he identifies it as an imperialist entity. In “The Era of Arab- and Muslim-bashing: We and the World after September 11,”³ Amin argues that the Arab and Muslim world is suffering from a global smear campaign. For instance, the “events” of September 11 are thought by many to have been organized by Muslims, while in reality this was not the case. Amin does not elaborate as to who was behind the attacks if not Al-Qaeda, though he hints at the likelihood of an “inside-job.” His main aim however, lies in alerting Arabs and Muslims to the smear campaign against them and “reminding them of the justness of their case.”⁴ In The Era of Muslim-bashing, Amin rejects everything that does not fit the image of a noble, well-to-do Arab world. To him, the images of plun-



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der in Baghdad that followed the American invasion must have been part of the greater ploy to defame Arabs, for the footage of looting Iraqis fitted the profile of the “barbaric Arab” all too well. The image of the West as presented by Amin remains rather vague, which is perhaps necessary if it is to be blamed for the wide range of wrongs in the world that Amin perceives. Perhaps unsurprisingly, since he is an economist, the West is defined by Amin primarily in economic terms: capitalism and imperialism are the hallmarks of the West. The end of the Cold War has left the world with a new situation, Amin argues, in which capitalism has re-emerged in its original, crude form. While during the Cold War capitalism was diluted, our present era is characterized by the kind of capitalism that was prevalent when Karl Marx lived.⁵ Amin is far from alone in levelling his critique against the West in economic terms. With the demise of the Soviet Union and the communist alternative to liberal capitalism it would seem that capitalism is no longer ideologically challenged and that, thus, anti-Westernism is a mainly culturally informed antagonism. But Amin and other leftwing Egyptians show the continued relevance of ideologically informed economic criticisms of the “capitalist West.”

Muhammad Imara: incompatible civilizations

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to so-called “moderate Islamists” or “Islamic reformers,” sometimes also referred to as Islamists of “the middle way,” as distinguished from “fundamentalists.”⁶ It has been suggested that this trend has emerged from within Islamic fundamentalism, and that contrary to their radical progenitor, the Islamists of the middle way are willing and able to compete in a liberal democratic setting. Although some have challenged the description, Muhammad Imara is one of those Islamic thinkers commonly categorized as “moderate Islamist” (in Arabic the word used is *mu’tadil*, meaning “balanced” rather than “moderate”). Through his various weekly columns and appearances on television, he is an important contributor to Arab public opinion. In a recent publication he focuses on the relations between Islam and the West.⁷ Imara takes it as a matter of fact that the relations between the two have always been at best problematic, and at worst, bloody. Much like some Western authors who present Islam as a civilization that, since its inception, has opposed the West (or Europe, Christianity, or the “Judeo-Christian civilization”), Imara portrays the West as a civilization that has never really changed in its position towards the Orient (or Islam, or the Arabs). The West, according to Imara, has always been imperialist: it oppressed “the Orient and the Oriental peoples for ten centuries, from Alexander the Great ... to the seventh century [Byzantine emperor] Herakleios.”⁸ All this only ended, Imara explains, when Islam came on the scene and liberated the Orient from Western oppression. From that moment on, the West had been at odds with Islam. This historical narrative serves two purposes. Firstly, it provides the reader with an image of the West as imperialist per se. The West is imperialist simply because imperialism is what Western civilization happens to produce. Secondly, and partly as a consequence of the first lesson, there is nothing Muslims can do to alter the bad image that the West has of Islam. The West has exercised its oppression over the Orient before Islam emerged, which is seen as proof that the West will be aggressive towards the Orient regardless of Islam. This point is made elsewhere in the book, when Imara again stresses that the West campaigned against Islam long before 2001, and that clearly September 11 cannot be seen as the justification for Western attacks upon Islam. Imara’s portrayal of the West is different from that of Amin in that Imara focuses more on the idea of a religious conflict, in which the West stands opposed to Islam as a revolutionary religion and as an alternative to Western secular political systems. Though Imara does have economic grievances against the West, he stresses the cultural and civilizational differences between the Western and the Islamic worlds. In this sense his discourse echoes Huntington’s theory of a “clash of civilizations” as well as Bernard Lewis’s representation of East-West relations as characterized by perennial conflict.

Rida Hilal: the West’s double speak

While “the West” has conventionally denoted Europe and North America, ever since the end of World War II it is the United States that has commonly been viewed as its primary component. The liberal intellectual Rida Hilal goes further and tends not to speak of the West or Westernization, but of America and Americanization. In his recent book *Americanization and Islamization*,⁹ Hilal calls for a marriage of

Islam and democracy to take the place of the current situation in which rigid Salafi Islamization is coupled with American consumerism. Interestingly, Hilal contrasts the current process of Americanization with the pre-World War II process of Europeanization. He argues that whereas the Arab world today is taking but the foam of America, leaving aside its true riches, i.e. its values, the previous age of Europeanization was much more constructive: “Egyptians took from the Europeans the rule of law, constitutionalism, parliament, journalism, theatre, and cinema.”¹⁰ The result was that Egypt could vie with the most progressive of the world’s nations, and Cairo could face up to Paris or London. This so-called renaissance-period, Hilal argues, was eventually frustrated both by British imperialism and by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Egypt, when Cairo was known by many as “Paris along the Nile,” is common to many liberals in Egypt. A common understanding, not limited to liberals, is that Europe or the West in general contains certain highly commendable qualities with regard to governance and personal freedoms, but that Westerners betray these qualities in their foreign policy towards the Arab and Muslim world. Hilal claims that for a solution to “the Middle Eastern crisis” to be reached it is merely necessary “that America should honour the American values, most prominently the value of democracy.”¹¹ This is reminiscent of the way in which Arab nationalists from before WWII attacked European colonialism without rejecting the project of cultural and political Europeanization. As Hourani wrote of this disposition: “while the nationalists condemned British or French policy, the conclusion they drew was not that England or France were intrinsically bad but that they were being untrue to themselves.”¹²

Policies emerging from the “real West”

The study of occidentalism in Egypt yields images of the West as diverse as the various competing ideological trends among the Egyptian intelligentsia. There appears to be little agreement on the meaning of the West, especially when compared to the often-lamented uniformity and consistency of Western images of the “Orient.” The three authors disagree in particular about the background to detrimental Western foreign policy. While Amin views unwelcome policies as the logical outcome of a malicious economic philosophy dominant in the West, Imara sees the West acting according to a supposed deeply-rooted anti-Islamic nature. Hilal, however, believes the West is acting in a manner unbecoming of its “real” values, and evokes the notion of an ideal, universally desired West.

There are, however, also striking convergences in these occidentalisms. In all three accounts, the West is perceived to be of paramount importance for Egypt and the wider Arab world. While only Hilal seeks the solution to the region’s problems in an assertion of the “true West,” all three authors agree that the main source of the region’s problems lies in policies adopted by the “real West.” This distinction between the ideal and the actual may also help us to understand the discrepancy between Western self-identifications and the image of the West elsewhere in the world.

Notes

1. E.g. Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao, “Gauging Arab Support for Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (2005); Pew Research Center, *Views of a Changing World* (Washington, 2003).
2. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual Thought* (London, Pluto Press, 2004).
3. Galal Amin, *‘Asr al-tashhir bi-l-‘arab wa-l-muslimin: nahnu wa al-‘alam ba’d 11 sabtambar 2001* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2004).
4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid., 10.
6. E.g. Raymond Baker, *Islam without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
7. Muhammad Imara, *Al-islam wa al-gharb. Ayna al-khat’a? .. wa ayna al-sawab? ..* (Cairo: Maktaba al-shuruq al-duwaliyya, 2004).
8. Ibid., 65–66.
9. Rida Hilal, *Al-Amraka wa al-Aslama: Ma’zaq ‘Arab al-Yaum* (Cairo: Dar Masr al-Mahrusa, 2004).
10. Ibid., 33–34.
11. Ibid., 15.
12. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 298.

Robbert Woltering is Ph.D. Fellow at ISIM. He studies images of the West in post-Cold War Egyptian cultural discourse.
Email: R.Woltering@isim.nl